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## Review of Peer Pressure, Peer Power: Theory and Practice in Peer Review and Response for the Writing Classroom

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**RW**

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Review of *Peer Pressure, Peer Power: Theory and Practice in Peer Review and Response for the Writing Classroom*

Edited by Steven J. Corbett, Michelle LaFrance, and Teagan E. Decker, 2014

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**P**eer Pressure, Peer Power: Theory and Practice in Peer Review and Response for the Writing Classroom (\$38.00 in paperback; 296 pages) compiles research and theory articles from a wide assortment of scholars interested in peer review, an area of research that, according to the editors, is woefully underdeveloped, despite being “a ubiquitous feature of the composition classroom” (Lawson Ching, p. 15). As such, this book provides valuable insights into theories and research-based pedagogical suggestions to increase the effectiveness of peer review in various contexts. With the aim of keeping this review concise, I will not address each article featured in this book, and will cite individual articles only by author name with the page number for direct quotes. This in no way is intended to act as a slight toward those chapters that aren’t included; each chapter contributes to the larger discourse in meaningful ways and warrants attention.

*Peer Pressure, Peer Power* is presented in four sections, “Theory toward an Informed Practice,” “Practice Complicates Theory,” “Critical Reflection

on Theory and Practice,” and “Tips and Tools toward Productive Peer Review and Response.” The articles in the book rely on the gold standards of composition theory, such as Nancy Sommers’ *Responding to Student Writing* and, of course, Kenneth Bruffee’s *Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’*, theories that won’t be restated here. Suffice it to say that the research methodologies and questions that prompted the studies seem to be robust and valid.

The editors and authors in this book come from a wide range of backgrounds and practices, including composition, writing centers, WAC/WID, and other practitioners of different levels, resulting in a rather broad scope. For instance, topics range from instructor-led group conferences; multimodal peer review; authority concerns in peer response; community-based assessment and peer review; peer review in writing intensive, discipline-specific content courses; and various approaches to ensuring quality peer review such as using rubrics or tables, or emphasizing training. I appreciated that the articles in this book targeted specific aspects of peer review in various, narrow contexts, rather than relying on overly general approaches, even though this may limit the generalizability of some of the results and implications emphasized, and general practitioners may struggle to relate to or apply all of the various suggestions, given their different contexts.

I also appreciated the authentic attitude many of the authors held toward the very complex interactions between individual students, peer review approaches, and varying theories of peer review. Authors tended to “complicate and enrich theoretical notions of what it means to collaborate, teach and learn in [peer review] situations” (p. 61) rather than relying on or presenting oversimplifications. For example, one chapter discusses the issues surrounding power and authority in the classroom regarding peer reviews, noting that peer review is often utilized as a way of preventing issues of teacher appropriation of student texts. However, as Lawson Ching claims, “[f]or scholars...to posit that student-only groups have autonomy is less an effacement of authority than it is a masking of an authority that is always present” (p. 26), indicating that teachers need to be aware of the influence their authority maintains, despite the perceived relinquishing of authority in peer response.

As a writing instructor who regularly employs peer review/response in a variety of contexts with students of a variety of backgrounds, including many multilingual students, I was quite eager to get my hands on this book and see what theory and research propose about maintaining effective peer review practices. Anecdotally, I have observed that students frequently start the term dreading peer review as they have had poor experiences with it or it has been perceived to be a waste of time in the past, but I generally note a shift in reported attitudes via student reflections resulting in an appreciation for the collaboration and additional feedback that peer review affords. I found myself agreeing with many of the pedagogical implications afforded by the articles in the book, and noted that many of my approaches to peer review were seconded by these scholars. For example, I have past experience directing peer tutoring programs with hired tutors and frequently use materials developed there in my own composition classes to help guide peer review activities. Rysdam and Johnson-Shull, in their book chapter, recommend that “specific response skills taught to tutors can and should be taught to all writers and should frame the basis for peer review” (p. 86), and they provide some concrete suggestions and resources to help guide such training.

While this collection provides a nice snapshot of research and theory focused on peer review across a wide range of environments, there were some aspects that could have been improved. For example, while one chapter addressed peer review in discipline-specific writing intensive courses, it only investigated three disciplines: psychology, history, and English literature, disciplines that are frequently connected to the humanities in which writing and negotiation in writing may be more valued than other, more STEM-based fields. Addressing other disciplines would be very helpful. Also, as someone who primarily works with multilingual students from a variety of backgrounds, I was somewhat distraught to see only one chapter directly addressing interactions between multilingual students and their native English-speaking peers. In the increasingly diverse classes we teach today, we need both more concrete pedagogical implications for and research on ways to foster effective peer review in mixed group settings. This collection would have been a good opportunity to encourage more of such research.

Finally, as one who values the formatting and presentation of information as an important component of effective rhetorical communication, I would be remiss if I didn't comment on the woeful lack of coherent visual rhetoric on the cover of this book. The jarring combination of bright greens and purples with six different fonts on the front alone do not do this book any favors. Also, obtaining a copy may be tricky; the book is hard to find on the Fountainhead press website (it is part of the X Series for Professional Development under the *English* tab). However, despite these relatively minor issues, *Peer Pressure, Peer Power* is a meaningful addition to my bookshelf. I appreciated the theory-based research and suggestions to improve peer review, and I look forward to implementing peer review more effectively in my classes.

## References

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